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February 23, 2009

Re: support of funding for legal services

For many years I was the Director of Elder Law practice at Connecticut Legal Services, Inc. (CLS), and for many years prior to that I was a staff attorney at several legal services programs in Connecticut. About eight years ago I left CLS for a position with AARP.

Legal services programs were developed to provide civil legal representation to the poorest and most vulnerable individuals. It has always attracted bright and committed staff who accept incredibly low salaries -- it is hard to make less practicing law than a legal services salary -- for the privilege of assisting needy people. The clients served by legal services have lives of great stress, and often face serious problems that make it difficult to escape poverty, including disability, cognitive limitations, or having responsibility for meeting the needs of a disabled family member. Many are elderly and frail, struggling to remain in the community with some dignity, many are children who cannot provide for their subsistence, and some are victims of abuse. For most people, being cheating of \$100 is annoying; for a low income household it could result in the loss of housing or necessary energy services or adequate food. An impoverished individual who cannot access needed medical care may lose their job and become homeless, or need institutionalization. A domestic violence victim may not be able to safely escape abuse without help. The stakes are very high.

Over my years in legal services, its sophistication grew. It developed specialty level expertise to ensure high quality assistance was provided in the most efficient manner possible. It takes any lawyer about a year to really learn to practice, and another year to develop high level substantive and procedural expertise. If legal services suffers cutbacks, it will lose staff resources that will take years to rebuild. At least until IOLTA collections return to their prior level, identifying funding is essential to maintain existing services.

Legal services has never had the funding to come close to meeting the need for its assistance, but it has always made good use of the limited funding available to address problems. When the legislature adopted the IOLTA funding mechanism, everyone assumed this would provide stable, base funding -- no one anticipated the current recession. I urge you to find a mechanism to carry legal services through these difficult times. It is a state gem, a group of caring individuals delivering services at a sophisticated level and for very little funding, to vulnerable individuals without options.